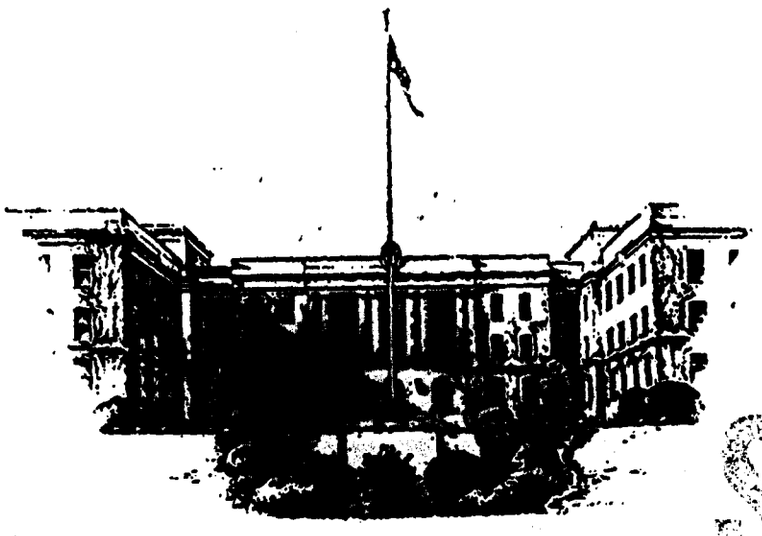
The Impact of Deployment Separation on Army Families



DIVISION OF NEUROPSYCHIATRY
Walter Reed Army Institute of Research
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Report WRAIR NP-84-6

THE IMPACT OF DEPLOYMENT SEPARATION ON ARMY FAMILIES

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PREFACE

This paper is one of a series of occasional, informal accounts of work in the Division of Neuropsychiatry at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The reports generally address topics in Army preventive medicine for which implementation responsibility lies significantly outside the Medical Department. Although their contents may ovelap partly with our publications in the scientific literature, most papers are based on trip reports, briefings, and consultations involving specific Army audiences. Comments to the senior author are welcome.

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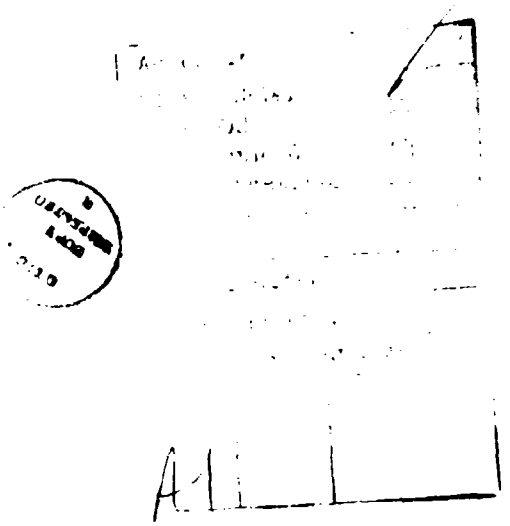

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INTRODUCTION

Brief family separations resulting from military training exercises are a common phenomenon in Army communities. Extended separations are less common and therefore little is known about the effects of these separations on Army family members. Although there have been numerous studies of military family separation beginning with Hill's (1949) classic study of military-induced separation during WWII, to more recent studies by Decker (1978), McCubbin (1977), Hunter (1977), Snyder (1978) and Nice (1980), most of these addressed routine separations in Navy populations. Orthner (1980 & 1982), in his "Families in Blue" series, noted the strain on Air Force families when the service member is placed in a temporary duty status away from the family. There are, however, few, if any, current studies of family separation in Army populations. Studies of Army populations are especially important at this time because of the substantive organizational changes occurring in the Army and changing mission requirements, e.g., peacekeeping units and rapid deployment task force units, etc. With the Army's move towards a regimental system and the establishment of the Joint Rapid Deployment Task Force, the Army's relationship to its families is unlike any seen previously. This new relationship is especially important when one considers that since the inception of the all-volunteer force in 1973 there are larger numbers of both first-term and career soldiers who are married. This large married content, when coupled with new organizational and mission requirements, suggests an Army-family relationship which can only intensify in coming years.

Home basing, as envisioned for the regimental system, and the deployment of troops to fulfill brief peace-keeping missions or to fight short wars in areas of critical importance, are predicated on the concept that military families will remain at the post where they had been stationed before the troops deployed. In previous conflicts, families dispersed when the service members deployed and replacements and their families took their places. Today, when the Rapid Delcyment Force is deployed or in the future when regimental units deploy for combat missions, families will remain at their home bases and the Army will be responsible for a community of families whose active duty members are deployed. The ability of the Army to provide support to these families, particularly in times of danger and conflict, will affect the morale and well-being not only of families but of the deployed soldier as well. The "cross-environment" effects of stress or spill-over stress from

home to the work place has been noted in the recent work of Billings and Moos (1981). Within the military context, as early as World War II, it was noted (Jones, et al., 1982) that individuals with family obligations were more likely to become combat psychiatric casualties due to combat stress than were single soldiers. More recently, Sohlberg (1976) and Noy (1978) have reported a relationship between family stress and combat stress casualties in times of war. Thus, it becomes increasingly important that issues and concerns regarding the military family be addressed not only for the purposes of reducing stress and dysfunction for those left behind but because of the growing recognition that the military family and its problems also affect the ability of the soldier to maintain himself and his level of combat effectiveness.

To insure optimal family functioning in times of stress and as a pre-condition to the development of effective family and community programs, a better understanding of the structure, relationships, expectations, stresses, supports, perceptions and needs of both the families and the military communities is needed. As a step toward this goal, we followed family members of a battalion-sized unit which was preparing to deploy overseas for approximately six months. Our goal was basically to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of Army separation from the standpoint of community supports available to the family as well as that of family needs.

DATA COLLECTION

The study began approximately six weeks prior to the deployment. In the course of collecting pre-deployment health data from the men of the unit, our staff asked all married men (N=141) if they would be willing for their wives to participate in a family health and well-being study. Those who agreed (82%) provided us with the addresses and/or telephone numbers of their spouses. We contacted the wives via telephone and/or letter and explained the study to them. For those who volunteered, the data collection process began with questionnaires (N=103), and for a sub sample (N=40), personal interviews. The final sample consisted of 78 wives. It should be noted that contrary to the concerns of some, the military families in our sample, for the most part, welcomed the

opportunity to express their opinions about issues that affected them. For many of the wives in our sample, the interviews and questionnaires were indications to them that the Army cared about how they were doing during the separation. Our study plan was to collect information from the wives at four different points in time: the first approximately four weeks prior to the deployment, then twice during the deployment, and again 4-6 weeks following the return of the men.

RESULTS

Descriptive Data

The wives in our sample were, as indicated previously, volunteers and represented 80% of those wives we were able to contact. The ethnic and racial background of the sample showed a slight under-representation of minority wives when compared to the distribution in the units as a whole. Distribution of the sample by rank of the husband showed that 56% of the wives were married to men who were E1-E5, 27% were married to men who were E6-E9, and the remaining 17% were the wives of officers. Approximately 80% of the families had children. It is interesting to note that one-half of the wives reported they had been married less than two years. This fact is important because it is the wives in this group who are least socialized into Army culture and who are least knowledgeable about existing services. We also found that 65% of the wives surveyed had experienced, at most, one previous separation. For many in our sample, this was the first prolonged separation. Another phenomenon worthy of note was the finding that over 25% of the wives left the area shortly before or just following the deployment. For the most part, they went to live with family members until their husbands returned. Those who left the area tended to be those who were not employed or who did not have school age children. Most gave as a reason for leaving the wish to be with family during the separation rather than to stay alone in a strange community. Others reasoned that the move back home would be an opportunity to save money on rent and utilities while the husband was away. Another smaller exodus occurred during the early summer. This latter group tended, however, not to relinquish apartments or trailers but rather planned an

extended visit with relatives.

Adjustment to Separation

Using pre-deployment measures of health, stress, attitudes towards the Army and service utilization as a baseline, we repeated these measures at two month intervals through the separation and again two months following the husbands return to see what, if any, changes had occurred.

In the area of general health, we noted very little change in either the frequency or severity of illnesses. Although a slight increase in the frequency of visits to health care providers was noted during the separation, this increase was not statistically significant. This was similar to the findings of Knudson, et al. (1982) in their study "Short Term Army Deployments". They found that self-report health ratings for wives and children stayed fairly stable in the good to excellent range during short deployments. We did, however, note an increase in the frequency of those health symptoms often related to stress. There were increased reports of headaches, weight change, sleep disturbances, and changes in menstrual regularity: specifically amenorrhea (cessation of menstruation) which was reported by several participants in the study and confirmed by medical officers at the post medical activity.

Among stresses of daily living, the most frequently reported problems involved parent/child relationships. Problems ranged from one mother's concern about the clinging behavior exhibited by her 18 month old following the father's departure to another mother who reported that her adolescent was beyond her control and had even physically attacked her. Other problem areas in order of descending frequency were related to the stress and pressure of having to make all major decisions alone; feelings of loneliness, isolation, and boredom; maintenance and repair of autos and appliances; handling of family finances; and concern about how best to deal with their husbands' lack of trust and fears of infidelity during their absence.

During the separation there was a shift in attitudes on the part of wives regarding the Army. Prior to the deployment the majority of the wives reported very positive attitudes about being associated with the Army, expressed pride in their husbands' careers and felt that their hus-

bands were making a contribution to society. During the deployment there was a general shift in these attitudes from positive to neutral. When asked whether they wanted their husbands to stay in the Army we noted that following deployment, officers' and NCOs' wives' attitudes shifted from positive to neutral; however, the wives of junior enlisted (E5 and below) shifted to the negative.

Readjustment After Husbands' Return

As with Nice's (1981) work on adjustment of Navy wives to their husbands' return after long term sea duty, our study found that a large number of wives experienced increased physical symptoms after their husbands' return from the overseas deployment. These symptoms included headaches, weight loss, head colds, and menstrual difficulties. Furthermore, 47% of the children suffered an illness after their fathers' return. These symptoms, based on previous work in this area, may be related to the stress of readjustment to the fathers' return and to the families attempts to reintegrate the fathers into family life.

Family problems that developed when husbands returned home were also cited by the wives. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the wives noted problems with their own anger and resentment over not being able to fulfill personal needs upon their husbands' return. Not having enough time to themselves, family decision making, and intolerance for their children was also reported by 30% of the wives. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the wives noted behavior and discipline problems with their children.

Overall, 23% of the wives found it moderately to very difficult to handle their husbands' return. When the wives were asked how they felt their marriage had been affected by the separation, 40% answered that separation had a positive effect on their marriage, 29% answered it had no effect, and 31% answered it had a negative effect.

A series of questions on family decision making before and after the separation was also asked. Wives were asked who made the major financial decisions in their families before their husbands went overseas. Twenty five percent (25%) of the wives said their husbands usually or always made the major financial decisions. When their husbands returned, 19% of the wives reported their husbands usually

or always made major financial decisions. Thus, percentage of husbands usually making the financial decisions went down slightly after the deployment while that of wives usually making such decisions went up. Still, more than half of the wives, both pre- and post-deployment, noted they made financial decisions jointly with their husbands.

Wives were also queried as to who made major decisions about the children before, during, and after the deployment. Before the deployment, 30% of the wives who responded to this question said they usually or always made such decisions while 51% said decisions about the children were made equally between them and their husbands (17% of the wives had no children). During the deployment, 74% of the wives made the major decisions about the children. After the deployment, patterns of decisions making about children returned to pre-deployment levels.

In summary, upon their husbands' return, wives and children did undergo a period of at least moderately stressful readjustment characterized by physical symptoms, children's behavior problems, and wives' lower levels of tolerance for requirements imposed on them by their husbands and children. However, the overwhelming majority of families were able to readjust in a fairly short period of time (within 2 months after the husbands' return).

Support Systems

To better understand the effectiveness of both formal and informal supports in the Army community, we looked at support utilization patterns, satisfaction with supports, and knowledge of formal support systems. It is not surprising that the wives of the lower ranking enlisted men had the least knowledge of the available support agencies. In spite of the fact that the husbands' unit had mailed information packets to all families regarding the available services, a significant portion of the population did not know about these services or how to use them. When we consider those who do not know about the services and add to them the group aware of existing services but reluctant to use them for a variety of personal reasons, a sizable group of unsupported families exists. In our sample we found that over 30% were reluctant to use formal family support agencies because of the belief that people "should be able to solve their own problems". Others felt that family problems should not be discussed outside of the

family unit. Interestingly, about 20% felt that the military people who are trained to help with problems really "aren't interested in helping". Last, but not least, is the small but ever present group (10%) reporting reluctance to seek outside help with family problems because it might be "held against my husband" or "hurt his career". These perceptions about service utilization were consistent across rank groupings. In other words, the wives of officers had these perceptions in the same proportions as enlisted men's wives.

Contrary to the popular notion that the military family is an isolated unit with little support from its extended family, we found quite the opposite to be true -- at least in terms of perceptions. The extended families of our sample were perceived to be very important supports although those family members were often far away. Regular telephone contact and the knowledge that they were available for help was a major source of perceived support.

Support from contacts with friends and neighbors, however, tend to be perceived as much less helpful than is suggested in most writings about the military community and the "mutual support efforts" of its members. Wives in this study reported that friends were often a source of support but these friends were also the source of demands on time and energy. Many newcomers to the military community were socially isolated, living off-post and had not developed a network of friends. Neighbors who were viewed in a more neutral vein before the deployment were later seen as a source of bother and irritation due to minor differences and conflicts. The idea of neighborhood and community support does not emerge as a major source of support for these families. The continual transience of many of the lower ranking off-post families who move frequently probably contributes to the lack of a sense of community and neighborhood. This finding is similar to that of Orthner (1980) who reported the majority of his Air Force respondents did not feel close to people in their community, with only 10% feeling close to their neighbors and only slightly more than half of the wives reporting that they felt very close to their friends.

In addition to the questionnaires and interviews used to collect information, we also requested that a number of the more formal Army agencies and support systems as well as several of the more informal support systems, provide us with weekly reports regarding the number and type of con-

tacts with family members of the deloyed unit. The more formal agencies we monitored included Army Community Services, American Red Cross, post school system, post Military Police, the Inspector General's office, the Judge Advocate's office, and the post Finance Office. These specific agencies were labeled as formal because of the rather specific and well defined functions they perform. Three "informal" service groups were also monitored. These included the rear detachment, which consisted of a small element of the deployed battalion that remained on post to manage equipment and personnel not deployed; the Chaplain, who in addition to his religious responsibilities, provided a variety of services and supports to families; and finally, the commanders' and first sergeants' (1SGs') wives' telephone chain. This telephone chain had been developed at the request of the deploying unit so that the wives of those in leadership positions could receive and pass on information to the wives of the men in their husbands' units.

Reports from the formal support agencies indicated that Finance had contacts with fewer than 10% of the families. It was our observation that most of the problems regarding finances would have occurred even if the service member had been present, and his failure to inform his spouse of the financial changes that had occurred was the main reason for the contacts. The Judge Advocate's office had contact with fewer than 5% of the families. The major problem addressed in these contacts was with wives who had experienced difficulty using the powers of attorney which their husbands had executed prior to their departure. The American Red Cross reported a small number of contacts for births, deaths and illnesses. The Army Community Services office documented surprisingly few requests for assistance and the Inspector General, personnel (AG) and Military Police reported receiving no requests for assistance.

Our study found that more families turn to the Army's informal support systems such as the rear detachment, the Chaplain or the commanders/1SGs' wives than to formal Army agencies. The rear detachment was clearly the most highly utilized resource. The majority of the contacts were about mailing packages, obtaining ID cards, and seeking information about making calls to their husbands. There were requests that information be transmitted by the rear detachment to husbands regarding problems that the mail would be too slow to resolve: issues such as house payments and car tag renewals. There were also requests for help with personal problems ranging from finances, to leases, to

difficulties with landlords. The rear detachment also received requests from deployed service members asking that someone check on their spouses. The Chaplain reported a variety of problem areas he was asked to address. Several wives had complained and were unhappy about the demanding and controlling way in which their husbands wrote to them. Others reported inappropriate behavior by men ranging from a situation in which a neighbor exposed himself, to "peeping toms" and being followed while in their cars. The wives' telephone chain was used in some instances to notify wives of group activities. Often this was the first contact with the "Army system" for many of the wives. Only two of the commander/1SG wives reported receiving frequent calls for assistance. Most of the calls concerned packages, pay problems and requests for information. Most of these problems were referred to the rear detachment, or in the case of personal or family problems to the Chaplain.

Wives' Reactions to Study

Upon the husbands' return from the Sinai, wives were asked a number of questions concerning their reactions to participating in the study. Overall, the wives seemed positive about their participation in the study.

Wives were asked if the study was personally helpful because it gave them the opportunity to discuss or think more about their own feelings, problems, and family situations. Forty seven (87%) said yes and 7 (13%) said no.

Wives were also asked if the study showed that the Army is concerned about its individual families. Forty eight (89%) of the wives answered yes, 2 (4%) of the wives answered no, and 4 (7%) either answered unsure or left the question blank.

DISCUSSION

Cobb (1976) has suggested that social support, which can protect people in crises from a wide variety of pathological states, can be defined as information leading the individual or family to believe that they are cared for,

esteemed, and members of a network of mutual obliation. In this section we will discuss those things that seemed to have worked as social supports and make some observations on why.

Command Briefings

The earliest effort at communication with the wives was the command's "mandatory" pre-deployment family briefings and the mailed information packets. These briefings were well attended and the vast majority of the wives found them to be extremely informative. There is little doubt that these briefings, which included information on the mission, also contributed to the positive feelings the wives expressed regarding their husbands' contribution to society through his participation in the mission. Learning about the rear detachment was also specified as a tremendous support as was knowing there was an "official" route through which questions could be asked and information obtained other than depending on husbands. The briefings also gave some wives the opportunity to meet other wives.

The Rear Detachment

Many wives indicated in open-ended questions that the rear detachment had been their greatest source of support. The commander of the detachment and his staff often served as problem solvers rather than as gateways to other referral sources. They made calls to help solve complicated problems and they called wives back with accurate information. They were also willing to be advocates for the wives in some cases, for example, problems with a landlord. In some cases they escorted the wives to the proper Army agency and helped them negotiate the system. The personnel section mailed the wives invitations to call or come by if they had problems understanding their husbands' pay vouchers and sent them maps on how to get there. If the service member had not signed a release for his wife to obtain the voucher, they called the unit to see if it was an oversight. They also provided a quick way to get information to or from the deployed unit in cases that merited it. When it was realized that the wives telephone chain was not reaching all the wives, notices were mailed out regarding the resolution of some TDY pay issues and regarding problems with the mailing of packages. It should also be noted that some unrealistic demands were made on the

rear detachment such as requests for automobile repair, help with moving, etc. which the unit declined. The unit also was held responsible by some wives for problems over which it had no control such as the mailing of packages, TDY pay and the availability of telephone communications between families and their deployed spouses.

Newsletter

Most of the wives indicated that they thought the monthly newsletter designed to bring them information from the deployed unit as well as information about activities on post, was an excellent idea. However, to produce a newsletter which is both timely and informative proved to be more difficult than appeared on the surface and prior planning is necessary to insure success. It might be noted that the newsletter was the only source of information for the many wives who lived in other cities during the deployment, and was often their only tie to the military network during the absence of their husband.

Group Social Activities

Although most wives indicated a wish for more group activities such as picnics, coffees, and events for the children, those scheduled were poorly attended. Several wives indicated that they felt good about having been contacted about the activities even though they did not attend. It should be noted that those who organize these activities soon lose interest when attendance is poor.

Wives' Telephone Chain

This form of communication between unit and family is a complex issue. Although there is a tradition of commanders/1SGs' wives assuming this responsibility, it must be recognized that its success is person specific. Although one does not often find wives who will refuse the responsibility outright, their feelings about being expected to fulfill this role are often mixed. We believe that communication and information between unit and family is much too important to be left to an informal, volunteer process alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prepare For Deployment

Brief families before the deployment. Explain the mission's nature and justification. Describe supports to be available during the deployment. Don't make promises (for example, about mail delivery) which may be impossible to keep later. Allow time and opportunity for discussion of family questions and concerns.

Expect some children to have difficulty adjusting to a parent's absence. Have mental health personnel conduct meetings to discuss these normal reactions and suggest ways to manage them.

Appoint a rear detachment commander willing and able to deal with family problems. Provide the commander with adequate staff to do so. See that the commander has excellent relations with the Chaplain and mental health personnel for managing complex problems.

Establish a voluntary wives'communication and support network before the deployment. Run it as an "outreach" program to encourage participation by shy or depressed wives. Give the responsibility to the most enthusiastic volunteers available, regardless of their husbands' ranks.

Maintain Support During Deployment

Reinforce efforts of the rear detachment and wives' network by insuring access to resources needed to sustain family support functions.

Maintain the flow of accurate, timely information from official and informal sources to families. Use a newsletter, the wives' network, and the rear detachment to distribute information on mission progress, husbands' well-being and anticipated return, rumors, support resources, and families themselves. Give particular attention to gathering information from, and getting it to, off-post and out-of-town families.

Support Family Reintegration After Deployment

Prepare information on the problems of family reunion to be expected after re-deployment. Get information to families and service members in advance of reunion. Maintain support mechanisms for a time after deployment's end to assist in managing reunion problems.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of what may appear to be a number of problems associated with deployment, it should be noted that for the most part these families coped satisfactorily. Over half reported only minimal difficulty dealing with the separation, the exception was the wives of the junior enlisted men who reported experiencing moderate to severe difficulty in dealing with the separation. We have found that family separation does not necessarily result in serious psychological, attitudinal or physiological changes in all families. As expected, we found that some family units are more adaptive and therefore more resistant to the stresses inherent in separation. This does not, however, minimize the importance of continuing to provide both formal and informal supports and services for the well-functioning, adaptive families as well as for the multi-problem, dysfunctional families. An unanticipated finding of this study was that of the significant and highly valued role played by the military unit in providing support to families during the deployment and the frequency with which wives sought general support and assistance from informal support groups. The military unit appeared to serve as the credible link between family and service members and its most valued services were most often informational in nature, i.e., pre-deployment briefings, newsletter, rumor control, information and referral services, telephone chain, etc. Although the services of formal, specialized programs were utilized, there appeared to be a greater need for those informational services which enable and empower families to act and cope and which tend to convey to families that they are important and deserve to be informed. Thus, given the frequency of contacts with the unit and the value families placed on these contacts, it appears that the unit is one of the single most important links between the family and the service member during a prolonged separation. Given the importance of this link,

Army planners may wish to consider the potential value of supplementing and/or expanding the family support role of military units.

There is little question that deployment separation creates various degrees of psychosocial disruption and stress for military families. There is also little reason to believe that we will ever be able to totally remove all stresses associated with deployment separation. It is, however, highly likely that as we better understand this phenomenon, we will be able to provide those supports and services which will assist families in more adaptive coping. In so doing we can help avoid the dysfunctional resolution of stress and the potentially destructive impact that stress can have on both the family and the deployed service member whose optimum performance is essential to the military mission.

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

The impact of a six-month battalion deployment on the families of service members was studied. A series post-sponsored actions to reduce the detrimental effects of the deployment are described: family briefings before the deployment, strong support from the rear detachment and other post resources during the deployment, and an active wives' network.

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